DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 041 CS 212 323

AUTHOR	Miller, Richard E.
TITLE	From Opposition to Resistance: Popular Culture and the Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE	Mar 90
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (41st, Chicago, IL, March 22-24, 1990).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Critical Reading; Cultural Influences; *Discourse Modes; Expository Writing; Higher Education; Language Role; *Popular Culture; Reader Response; Reading Writing Relationship; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	*Academic Discourse; Voice (Rhetoric); Writing Tasks

ABSTRACT

Bringing popular culture into the composition classroom is useful not because it erases the conflict between student and academic discourses, but rather because it serves to heighten this already extant conflict, thereby allowing it to become one of the subjects of study. Writing samples by two students early in the semester and class discussion about cultural influences reveal how students initially see themselves as having the option of choosing either to accept the unified world view that the teacher offers them or to maintain their own unified world view. That the world views under consideration might be internally contradictory and conflicted or that these world views might overlap, placing both student and teacher in more than one world of discourse simultaneously, are not possibilities the students entertain until later in the course, as three additional student writing samples reveal. The goal by the end of the course is to get students to be willing and able to simultaneously value and critique themselves and the positions they maintain, even though conflicts come to light as they are asked to think in new and potentially threatening ways both about their surroundings and the role language plays in their interpretations of these surroundings. (Student writing samples are included.) (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED319041

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

RICHARD E. MILLER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Richard E. Miller
5th Floor
Cathedral of Learning
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Conflict in the Classroom: Pedagogies "for" Resistance
Session E15, Thursday March 22, 1990 5:00-6:15 PM
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Chicago, Illinois

From Opposition to Resistance: Popular Culture and the Composition Classroom

When I started graduate school four years ago, my first major project was to design an imaginary writing course, complete with syllabus, course description, reading list and rationale. Intent on engaging the students, I designed a course I felt would allow them to read, write and talk about something they knew well--popular culture. I thought at the time that this shift in content would be enabling in itself because it would, almost automatically, provide the students with the opportunity to write with authority about "their culture" in an academic setting.

One of the many problematic assumptions underlying that imagined course was that students would be happy, perhaps even delighted, to discuss popular culture within the walls of the

CS212343

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

academy. It didn't occur to me at the time that students might resist having "their world" interrogated by the "academic world," that the introduction of popular culture into the composition classroom might actually serve to heighten the conflict between these two "worlds" rather than ease or erase it. Now that I have had the opportunity to teach a sequence centered on popular culture, I would argue that bringing popular culture into the composition classroom is useful not because it erases the conflict between student and academic discourses, but rather because it serves to heighten this already extant conflict, thereby allowing it to become one of the subjects of study for the course.

Even so, I do not want to give the impression that exposing these competing and conflicting discourses in the classroom is a wonderful thing to be pursued in itself (so that the time separating my imaginary sequence and the sequence I discuss here has only taught me to trade conflict for popular culture as the way to "solve" the problem of the composition classroom.) Instead, I want to use this occasion to explore the kinds of conflicts that surfaced when I brought popular culture into my classroom, conflicts that made it clear to me that what is needed in the composition classroom is not a change in content but rather a change in pedagogy.

I will begin by looking at how one of my students responded to an early writing assignment that asked the students to compare the way they had read culture in a previous assignment with the

way Roland Barthes read culture in the *Mythologies*. In order to discourage a batch of papers arguing Barthes' superior vision, my assignment asked the students to:

> assume that the difference between your work and Barthes' is not caused by idiosyncracy or inexperience (yours or his) but is produced by different methods of analysis, different ways of reading....You should not find it necessary to argue for one method over another: the purpose of this paper is <u>not</u> to prove what is the best way to read culture, it is to begin to characterize different ways of reading culture.

Tracy responded to this assignment with an essay significantly entitled, "Barthes vs Me," where she defined the difference between Barthes' way of reading culture and her own as follows:

> [Barthes'] way of reading and defining is fine for some people, but I am not one of them. I take things for what they are, rarely digging and probing to find an underlying meaning. When I read something, I take the meaning however it is directly stated. I rarely, if at all, go looking for a more complex, in depth meaning. I figure, if there was suppose to be an underlying meaning that is really important to the entire text, then it should be brought to the surface for everyone to know about it.

Despite the provisions of the assignment, Tracy interpreted Barthes' work as a clear threat to her way of reading and understanding the world. In stating her defense, Tracy introduces an opposition that comes to occupy an important position in our class discussions: the choice that confronts a reader or writer is a choice between surface meaning and underlying meaning. Tracy chooses "to take things as they are," while other readers and writers "go looking for a more complex, in depth meaning."

After discussing Tracy's essay in class, my decision was to problematize this notion of "taking things as they are" in order to begin a discussion about the ways in which culture influences perception: I took the class back to a passage from Barthes' essay on "The World of Wrestling," where he speaks directly to this issue. He writes:

> What is portrayed by wrestling is therefore an ideal understanding of things; it is the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and placed before the panoramic view of a univocal Nature, in which signs at last correspond to causes, without obstacle, without evasion, without contradiction.

Our discussion centered on determining how a "univocal Nature" was "an ideal understanding of things" and what "constitutive ambiguity" might mean. While my students were more than willing to argue that the world inside the ring was idealized, that in the "real world" bad guys do not always look like bad guys, they would not make the step to say that in "the real world of reading" there is no "things as they are," that all acts of reading are acts of interpretation. Although I had imagined that the juxtaposition of these two passages would allow us to critique Tracy's positivisitic definition of reading, something quite different happened: instead of hearing the delighted sounds of insight, I heard the sound of heels digging in all around the room. Neither Barthes nor I had spoken with any authority during this discussion: the students had worked with me to understand Barthes' position, but they weren't buying it. Wrestling was one

thing, reading was another. Anybody could see that.

I must admit that at the time I was baffled by my class' fairly unified rejection of my argument. After re-reading Kathy's essay and reconsidering class discussion, I began to think of Kathy's essay and the discussion that grew out of it as acts of resistance. Sensing in Barthes' argument a threat that seemed to call into question both their individuality and their sense of free choice, my students responded in anger, circling their wagons to protect their own. To do otherwise would require them to interogate the opposition of surface and deep reading and the opposition of deep reading and pleasure. As the exerpt from Kathy's essay shows, at this point in the course, the invitation to engage in such an investigation has little appeal.

While this way of reading Kathy's essay and the subsequent class discussion does account for the anger present in both, I soon rejected classifying these responses as acts of resistance because, in their present form, they are not acts that the academy recognizes or values nor are they acts that strengthen the students. I think it is more accurate to see these responses as instances of what Aronowitz and Giroux term "oppositional behavior," which in this case means behavior that serves "less as a critique of schooling than as an expression of dominant ideology" (*Education Under Seige*, 100). That is, these students are not so much critiquing the way the academy goes about doing its work as they are expressing opposition to the possibility that their world views might be culturally constructed. Their

responses, thus, do not critique the institution from the inside, but rather reject its influence from the outside.

If Tracy's essay and the subsequent discussion offer evidence of the kind of oppositional stance that students assume when popular culture is brought into the classroom, Ginny's essay provides an example of how students represent this world that they percieve as being threatened and under attack, this world of surface reading they claim to occupy. Before turning to Ginny's essay, though, I want to make it clear that what I am trying to represent here are the options that students perceive as available to them, that they see themselves as having the option of choosing either to accept the unified world view that the teacher offers them or to maintain their own unified world view. That the world views under consideration might be internally contradictory and conflicted or that these world views might overlap, placing both student and teacher in more than one world of discourse simultaneously are not possibilities the students entertain at this point in the course. It is all or nothing in this arena.

This division between the two "worlds" was most apparent in the work my students did in response to John Berger's essay, "Ways of Seeing." For this assignment, I sent them to the Carnegie Art Museum and asked them to interrogate a painting and get it to speak. The goal, they were informed, was to follow Berger's example and "work against the process of mystification." Ginny chose to write on Penck's *Geburtstagsfeier*, where a tiger

is depicted in the middle of a birthday party attended by a variety of famous people (Jesus, Stalin, Lincoln, for example). Puzzled by the tiger's presence, Ginny wrote the following:

> What in the world was the tiger doing in the painting and who were all the people standing around it. I then noticed that some of these figures were similar to figures that I knew. Did these figures represent the cultured part of society while the tiger represented the uncultured aspect? I have come to believe that this is what the painting really means; That I am like the tiger for I am not yet cultured while other members of society are. I can readily identify with this tiger he is like me I am going to college to become worldly and cultured while the tiger has ventured into the city to obtain these same goals.

Because Ginny works to explain both the logic of the painting's composition and the way in which the painting can be seen to shed light on her position in the academy, I see her response as markedly different from Tracy's. Nonetheless, there is something about the way that Ginny imagines herself and the world she occupies as student in the moment that she confronts this painting that I find troubling. Although Ginny's reading of the painting offers a view of education that I am sympathetic to--that is, education as more than the simple incorporation of new information, education as an activity that requires a radical transformation of the inner and outer self, Ginny's reading also represents both the magnitude and the impossibility of the changes that education requires of her. Ginny does not for a moment imagine, for instance, that as the tiger she has the power to devour these powerful figures who surround her: in her

reading, she is the one who has to do all of the changing and all of the changing has to be conforming.

If Kathy's and Ginny's essays bring to light the oppositions that surface in a composition classroom that discusses popular culture (surface and deep readings, deep readings and pleasure, the elite as cultured and the student as uncultured), their writing also provides a sample of the range of strategies student writers imagine at their disposal as they try to negotiate these conflicts: they can either assume an oppositional stance or they can comply. My goal is that by the end of the course the students will be able to imagine a different way of responding to the conflicts that arise when they sit down to write: my goal is, in short, to get the students to be willing and able to simultaneously value and critique themselves and the positions they maintain. Obviously, this is a place no writer ever fully occupies, for to do so would require the cessation of all conflict. Thus, since I cannot conclude with an example of that pure moment of grand conversion when the sky opened up and my students suddenly joyfully set about valuing and critiquing both themselves and the positions they maintain, I would like to close instead by looking at a point in the course where my students began to move in this direction.

My final assignment asked the students to look back over the work they had done and discuss what kind of readers and writers they had been throughout the course. Steve choose to re-read one of his earliest essays in light of the subsequent work in the

course. This earlier essay, written in response to an assignment that asked the students to discuss an object or activity that defined popular culture, focussed on George Michael and U2. Steve discusses this earlier essay in this way:

> In this [earlier] paper, I really do not look at what defines popular culture. Rather I describe the two artists, and then tell how they fit into a predetermined definition of what I myself have already decided popular culture is....It is implied that the culture is the same with or without these two artists [George Michael and U2]. I look at the artists as reflections in a mirror--as simply showing (representing) the culture that is already there.

So, in the beginning of the course, Steve was working with a notion of culture as some sort of unified, static entity that people, musicians in this case, fit themselves into. However, as Steve re-reads this essay at the end of the course, he realizes that this definition of culture as static and unified was not supported by his own observations. In his retrospective, Steve cites these conflicting observations and then proceeds to offer both a revised reading of his initial argument and a discussion of what led him to produce that argument at the beginning of the course.

> "One artist [George Michael] represents a materialistic...society. The other [U2] forces us to deal with our bad sides....These two both are representatives of popular culture in the United States today." This implies that there are different parts of--i.e., perspectives within--society which supports both ideologies.
>
> So, apparently, I already have an answer to the reconciliation question [that is, how does one reconcile a definition of culture as

> unified with the popularity of two ideologically divergent bands], though I don't explain it in the paper: it is that society is <u>not</u> one big, homogenous whole, but rather, it is that there are many different contributing parts (people), with different perspectives (a la Tompkins--!!) on society and culture and life and everything.

Although Steve wants to argue that he had a definition of culture as not "one, big homogenous whole" at the beginning of the course, it is not until the end of the course that he is able to articulate this position. It is particularly important to note that this realization comes about when Steve reflects on his own writing through the lens of Jane Tompkins' work. In short, at the end of the course, Steve is able to critique (and ultimately salvage) his previous position, and he is able to do so in a way that the academy (at least as I represent it) sanctions and values: Steve's text is self-reflexive, multi-vocal and grounded in critical reading.

While Steve's paper represents a willingness to reflect upon and to advance previous work in the course, Steve's is not a seamless text: the way he gets away from the implications of his insight into the heterogeneity of society is to trivialize the insight by making it seem overgrand--he has drawn together "society and culture and life and everything." So what has not happened by the end of the course is a wholesale conversion to the benefit of the academic enterprise: Steve is willing to do the work thatht e academy requires, but not without a dose of skepticism to qualify any of his discoveries. While I would argue

that his skepticism arises too quickly in this moment, that it serves to shut down further discussion of what follows from saying that society is not homogenous, I think it is important to recognize the fact that Steve's skepticism does not entirely cancel his insight: it may, in fact, be what ultimately allows him to negotiate the conflicted space that all writers occupy as they simultaneously perform and critique the work of the academy.

I would like to stress, in closing, that it is not the discussion of popular culture that has produced these conflicts: the discussion of popular culture has only served to make the presence of competing and conflicting discourses in the classroom more evident. I would argue that these conflicts are always present in the classroom regardless of what reading and writing sequence is used and I would argue further that we cannot and should not even attempt to solve these conflicts, if to solve means to erase, to resolve. These conflicts have come to light for the very good reason that the students have been asked to think in new and potentially threatening ways both about their surroundings and the role language plays in their interpretations of these surroundings: these conflicts are the very condition of our work in the course. The on-going challenge for us as composition teachers is to construct a pedagogy capable of using these conflicts to better prepare our students to recognize and negotiate the cultural conflicts that arise when they sit down to write about the worlds we mutually occupy.